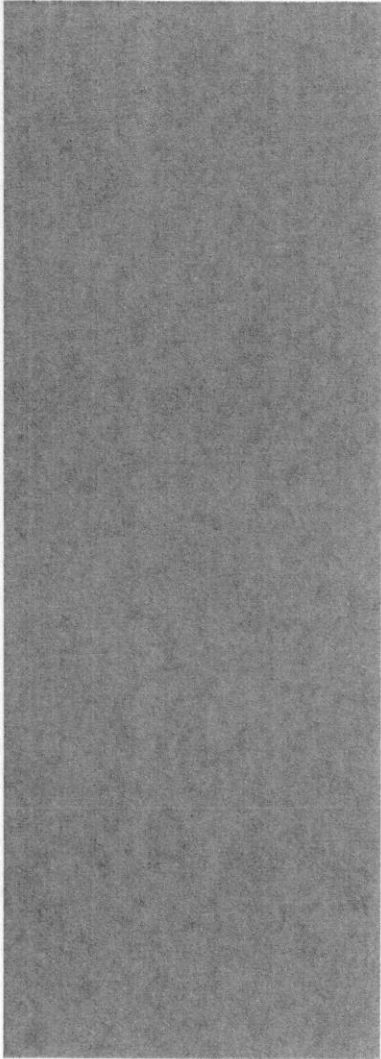


Kelly Large



Our Name is Legion



## Foreword

It has been fascinating to witness the gestation of Kelly Large's project, *Our Name is Legion*, over the last few months. Kelly was given a deliberately loose brief as to what was expected of her when she was commissioned to work with the students of Kesteven and Sleaford High School. None of the participants, the school, Beacon or Kelly knew what the outcome of the commission would be. The starting point of the project was an act of faith from all those involved and as with a lot of things the key is in the detail. This is certainly true in the case of a process-led project such as this, in which the processes employed by Kelly when developing the project have had a generative effect, extending the life of the project beyond the initial terms of engagement from the residency to the event, the filming, the editing, the screening, the panel discussion and now this publication. The image on pages 8 and 9 taken on the day of the event, frames a discursive arena in which each of the three texts offers us a perspective of a distinct aspect of the project, the process, the film itself and the wider cultural implications. This publication is one of a range of outcomes that form the expanded project of *Our Name is Legion*, and I look forward to future developments.

John Plowman

## Our Name is Legion

We are looking down upon a town centre street. In the camera's eye is a slow moving lane of traffic, a high street bank and a bin lorry is moving sluggishly along. School children move up and down, their bags heavy upon their backs. They wear dark blazers, the girls wear black trousers or short skirts and the boys are growing tall like bean shoots, all gangly and thin.

Suddenly, three abreast come other teenagers: in luminescent yellow safety vests and then emptiness. The street is momentarily still. Then quickly there are more, seven, ten, fifteen... thirty – they are pouring towards us, disappearing beneath the camera, a swarm of garish, fluorescent yellow.

I try to remember what it was like, when twisting the uniform felt edgy, rebellious and individual. I can't. They are a strange alien generation.

*Our Name is Legion*

Daniel Defoe famously used this quote from Mark's gospel (5:9) to sign on behalf of the petitioners, in his 'Legion's Address to the Lords'. In doing so, not only did he claim to speak on behalf of innumerable commoners but he also invoked a spirit of revolution.

*Our Name is Legion*

We are looking into a schoolyard, it is completely empty. Through the classroom windows there are moving shadows. A boy comes out, wearing a hi-vis vest and carrying a black jacket. He lifts his arms into the air as he walks and slowly twirls, aware of the camera, perhaps not sure where it is – so twirling for all watchers.

The town square gradually fills. It is stationary but moving, a constant flow of chatting, moving teenagers. Among the growing

yellow throng is a group of seven – no – eight girls. Each seems to be holding the vest. Then one waves it before her like a... toreador. She is playing.

*Our name is legion for we are many*

So speaks a man possessed, when called by Jesus Christ to give his name. One and yet a multitude. Jesus drives the demon from him and into a herd of swine, who driven mad, throw themselves off a cliff. There were over two thousand.

*Our Name is Legion*

They gather at the bus stop. There is a young mother in a pink top with a pushchair. There are so many people, so many yellow teenagers. She waits patiently until there is enough room to manoeuvre her infant forwards and steps briskly away into a moment of open space.

I think about those who are not wearing it – who don't want to join in – and assess the numbers: a sixth? Less? It is impossible to guess. The cameras only pick up certain views of the town, certain exits. But the ones who stay in their dark blazers, by contrast to all that yellow, become hi-vis themselves. They stand out as a patch of darkness, in a surreally luminous world.

*Our Name is Legion*

When I first studied sociology, I learnt about the analysis of crowds. Looking at footage of marches, gatherings and protests, academics searched for the flashpoint, the moment when a disparate gathering of people in one place becomes something else: a gang, a mob, a potentially dangerous mass. I learnt of the changes in behaviour that participants undergo, how the presence of the crowd can give people permission to act in extraordinary ways, from the smashing of a window, to the call for crucifixion.

What fascinated me most, was the moment *before* people become a crowd, the moment known as milling. Observers note how people talk, swap from group to group, update on news, and then somehow

transform... but not in Sleaford town square. It starts to dissipate and children begin to go home. No riot today.

*Our Name is Legion*

Some sixth form boys gather around a red car and one is looking for ways to tie the vest on to the rear wipers – a flag for the way home. Quickly the town square empties, and now I can pick out the film crew and the organisers, waiting by their equipment.

*Our Name is Legion*

Yellow. I ask myself why yellow? The vests were donated, they speak of utilitarian practicality. But colour is more than this: black shirted anarchists, the orange order, the 'red' left, and not forgetting the green of ecological politics across western Europe. Green is also the colour of the recent religious and political riots in Iran.

In 2009 yellow shirted royalists and middle class Thais clashed in the streets of Bangkok with red clad, rural poor. A violently colourful tragedy. Thai yellow is a pale lemon, an auspicious colour, it is a long way from the brash hi-vis of the Sleaford streets today.

*Our Name is Legion*

Back at the bus stop two girls are playing hand games, patting rhythmically – it seems odd, this simple playground game translated to the complex in-between time of teenagers. They tie their vests in a tight knot under their ribs. The more I look, I see more girls like this – and lads who have taken a marker-pen to theirs, nicknames and graffiti. The utilitarian sign of the worker becomes a stamp of individuality. Now the buses have been and there is a different mother with her pram, this time waiting all alone, unimpeded by youth.

*Our Name is Legion*

And no man now could bind him, not even with chains...  
Mark (5:3), Douay, 1609

Defoe invoked the biblical possessed man to threaten something beyond control – the multitude, the riot. For him, the multitude of evil spirits was a flourish, but one which embellished a revolutionary political message. In Kelly Large's artwork, 'Legion' points to many things: the sea of yellow youth that is also a community of individuals; the otherness of this experience as a visual and social phenomena; the artwork as multifaceted, able to contain many meanings; the potential of the crowd; our anti-'youth' media and importantly; a radical approach to being an artist in schools. A legion of possibilities in one colour and one film. One of the most memorable aspects of this film is the participant's ownership of the experience, in their ways of wearing the jacket, or their pleasure in the afternoon's event. It reminds me of another version of Defoe's Legion's Address in the Boston Library.

Our Name is Million, and We are more

Catherine Burge

## Monday 21 September 2009

John Plowman

There is frequently talk in the media of the transgressions of today's youth invariably portraying them in a negative light. I wondered whether the wearing of high visibility vests in your film is an affirmation of this tendency?

Kelly Large

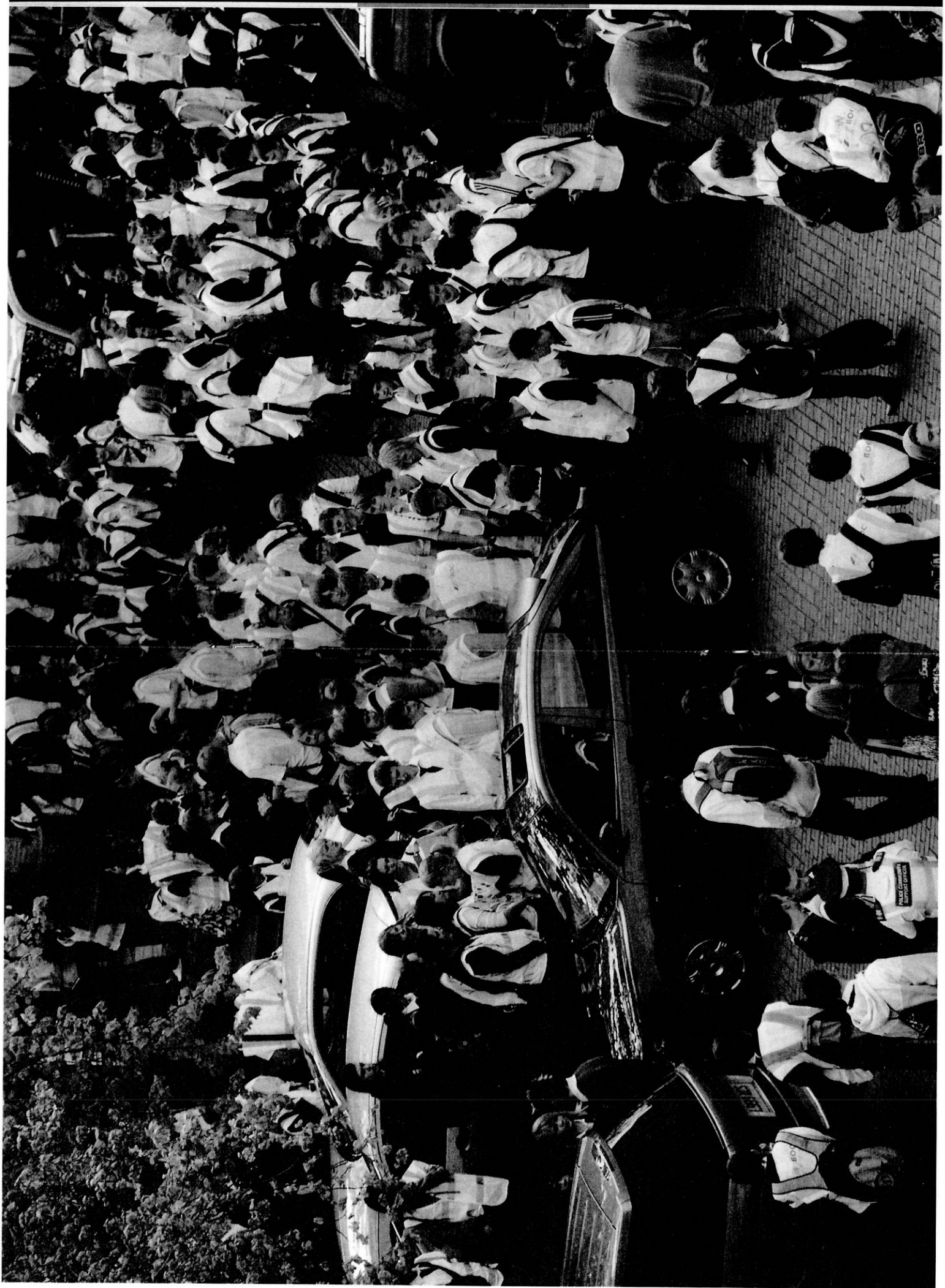
I invited the students to wear high visibility vests because of what they symbolised. Hi-vis vests carry many associations: they are worn by people in authority like police officers and event stewards, but they are also worn by community service offenders; and by cyclists as a form of protection on the roads. The vests conferred an ambiguous status on the wearers, neither positive or negative. This, I hope, leaves the viewer confused about what this mass of young people represent. Maybe it would have been a more democratic project and something I would have avoided, if whatever they were wearing conferred a distinctly positive or negative image of what a young person might be.

JP

On the day, in Sleaford on 30 April 2009, when the filming of the event took place there was a sense of something happening; of there being, at that moment in time an uncertainty, even an element of danger. It was that feeling of apprehension that gave the project its edge, because over the 45 minute period, when the production took place, people weren't clear about what was going on: is it a revolution, a celebration, a protest, an orderly march? So there was an element of uncertainty, but only for that brief moment and I wonder whether that sense of being comes over in the film? Or whether, in the film, the viewer begins to make definitive judgments about what is taking place?

KL

Well, I hope through the edit and the spatial presentation of the work,





to preserve the feeling of uncertainty or ambivalence, that was felt on the day. I'm still editing the footage and have in mind the opening sequence of the film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the 1970s version, where alien seeds are dispersed throughout San Francisco on the rain and grow into brightly coloured flowers, that eventually mutate into human clones and take over the world. I haven't seen it in years, but the image of these exotic flower buds silently infiltrating the city, as everyday life continues as normal, has really stayed with me. The flood of colour was both innocuous and terrifying at the same time. I guess the film was about the unease that was felt at that time in society, and a lack of faith in institutions that we had previously trusted.

Anyway, this memory has influenced the shooting and editing of the film: the students in yellow build up from a slow trickle into a flood of colour and then disperse leaving shots of empty schools and empty roads. Empty public spaces, I find, are charged with a feeling of unease.

JP

I would suggest what you're talking about is the language of film, whereas I think that's different to what was happening in those 45 minutes, because of course one uses the language of film to construct a narrative so it evokes a particular moment in time.

It's almost like making a film of a moment in history, *Ben Hur* perhaps. You're re-creating a narrative that has already occurred and the film becomes an extension of this narrative.

KL

I think the event and the film are intrinsically linked. The 45 minutes were performed, orchestrated with the film in mind. When developing the project I was thinking about where the cameras might go and how these related to the people.

It would have been a very different 45 minutes if there had been no cameras, not as many people would have taken part. The participants were drawn to the cameras and to being observed. I reckon the young people might have behaved differently without the knowledge they were being filmed. I don't think it's a case of the event

happening and then constructing a new narrative from that, I think one affected the other.

JP

That's fascinating because it's almost like Sleaford became a film set for the day so perhaps the whole thing was a fiction. That places a completely different take on this whole idea of engaging with the social, perhaps the social is fiction, of course, it's almost like it was story-boarded...

KL

... and I mean the social is constructed: what is social? Everything is...

JP

... social constructs, yeah, it's like the streets of New York. So going back to that notion of authorship, you put your stamp on it right from the beginning so it was authored in that sense. But perhaps it was authored in the sense that somebody like Mike Leigh or Ken Loach make their films, so perhaps there's an element of that improvisation in your film?

KL

It makes me think about a famous science experiment that discovered particles appear to act differently if they are observed, I think it is called the Observer Problem. They found that the observer's consciousness determines what they see and experience and this affects the outcome of the experiment. So one's understanding of the social is affected by our subjective viewpoint, the social world isn't an objective truth...

JP

... so there's an assumption that when we interact with the social, that it's a fixed actuality, when perhaps what we're really engaging with are fictions. It does beg the question whether, because we're talking about the social as a series of fictional narratives, which I think it is; there are lots of narratives which surround us in the everyday, it comes back to that issue of whether art can empower? Is art also a fiction? Perhaps it is. Perhaps art is a fiction as well.

KL

Yeah, but I prefer the word 'construct', rather than 'fiction'. For me, fiction suggests something totally imagined, whereas construct points to a lived experience; one that is real and actual, but shaped by context. I hope that the film reveals the varied, maybe conflicting ideas of the 'social' or 'community', that the different constituents of this project have in mind... the school, the students, the townsfolk, you, me, the funders, the 'art world' and the vision for art's function that each constituent holds.

## Hometime

In July the Culture Show covered *Marina Abramovic Presents* as part of their feature on the 2009 Manchester International Festival. We were shown a clip in which Abramovic was leading an initiation ritual that required all visitors to her exhibition to don white lab coats and undergo a symbolic cleansing of their perceptual faculties before seeing the work. This, she said, would prove their commitment to the viewing experience. The ritual recalled various things: suicide cults fictional and actual (*Logan's Run*, Jonestown), a renegade drugs trial, or perhaps some new form of management training.

This kind of participatory art – which promotes the notion of the artist as romantic visionary – often involves coercion: the artist must find ways of inducing confederacy among the gathered individuals, so that their vision seems to accord with his/her own. The audience is a congregation meeting its preacher, whose liturgy primes them for transcendental experience. Other kinds of participation – those that uphold a more Barthesian notion of the artist as subject to the collective vision of the audience – involve a loosening of power: the audience does not participate in the artist's ritual; the artist participates in theirs.

In Kelly Large's *Our Name is Legion* this ritual is 'hometime'. The artist doesn't literally participate in it, but mediates her participation through the vehicle of an abstraction. Pupils from three local schools are asked to wear high visibility vests as they gather in Sleaford town square to wait for the bus home. Filmed by strategically placed cameras, this adolescent crowd is not requested to behave differently than normal, only to instantiate itself more candidly and in greater numbers. The point in their schedule that has been chosen – the transition between one state apparatus, the *school*, and another, the *home* – is significant. For its transitional character is synonymous with the transitional character of adolescence. Hometime magnifies adolescence: a transitional demographic is seen 'in transit'. The spaces the adolescent inhabits – the bus stop, the newsagent, the

fried chicken joint – *become* adolescent. Hometime is when society feels the impact of adolescence, and *Legion* reifies this impact.

We might ask (we might ask the newsagent, with his two-at-a-time door policy): does it need reifying? Does the school uniform not already take care of this? What does the visibility vest add to the school uniform; does it affirm or efface its conformist livery? If the school uniform signals conformity, the visibility vest signals permission, permission granted to undertake a certain task, authority to act in a certain way. As a signifier, it is no less suggestive than Abramovic's lab coat; its role here, however, is not to prime the participants for transcendental experience, but quite the reverse: to accentuate the very concrete behavioural codes of a particular demographic. The visibility vest does two things: it rhetorically sanctions that behaviour and gives us licence to observe it. In *Legion*, the pupils live a work, and we watch them living it, spectating on their condition as social subjects. They too spectate on this condition, and we watch them spectating on it – as we do more covertly on the top decks of buses at four o'clock on weekdays. *Legion* licenses us to stare, when we would normally glance surreptitiously.

Of course, the visibility vest also has a cinematic function: to create a 'volcanic lava flow of adolescents moving through the grey streets of Sleaford's town centre' (as Beacon's press release had it). The pupils appear to the camera as magma forced up from the social mantle. Hometime, though predictable – circadian, in fact – is always surprising in the suddenness of its occurrence. The rush hour, with its slow, constipated hysteria, has nothing on it. Unlike rush hour, hometime seems to happen to the world rather than being caused by it, ambushing us with comic regularity at that languorous time of day when it is too late to begin something new but too early to finish what's been started.

In his book *Networked Art*, Craig Saper coins the term 'sociopoetic' to describe artworks that mimic social networks, vocations or institutions such as museums, cafes and shops. As neologisms go, it's an accurate description of the way in which such works construe artistic vision less as a 'timeless' faculty subject to posterity's judgement, than as one subject to the contingencies of the present. Critical evaluations of recent projects in this vein have long been

yoked to a 'relational' rubric, in which meaning is devolved to the intersubjective experience of the participants, be they the convivial subjects of Rirkrit Tiravanija's cafes or the less fortunate protagonists of Santiago Sierra's 'homeopathic' regimes (in which political refugees are engaged in pointless tasks to highlight unfair employment policies). Ina Blom has written that '[u]nderlying both these critical tendencies [i.e., art as social bonding at one end of the spectrum, art as activist at the other] is the question of why artists should work in and with the "concretely social"', when this is obviously done more efficiently by social workers, activists, politicians, and not to mention (at the non-crisis end of the scale) party planners, café owners, club hosts etc.\*\* The interests of the 'concretely social', she subsequently argues, are not well served by the fact that the artist's ultimate allegiance is to 'the field of art'.

But the 'work' that is done in the social realm is only done more efficiently by 'social workers, activists, café owners' and so forth if its purpose is to address some perceived shortfall between how things are and how things should be. A different schema holds for projects which are neither activist nor convivialist, but descriptive, topographical or psychogeographical in intent, and which, despite occurring in the social realm, do not aim to mimic other vocations which operate there. This is the case, for example, with Liam Gillick's critique of utopian-corporate sociality, and it is the case with *Our Name is Legion*, which choreographs adolescent sociality, not to expose some public sector oversight, but to explore its character as a medium.

Sean Ashton

\* Ina Blom, *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality and Media Culture* (Berlin; New York: Sternberg Press, 2007), p. 126.



Published by B. Press  
ISBN: 978-0-9553626-3-7  
[www.beaconartproject.com](http://www.beaconartproject.com)

Text © Sean Ashton, Catherine Burge, Kelly Large, John Plowman  
Image © John Plowman  
Designed by Fraser Muggeridge studio

Beacon would like to thank the following:

The Arts Council East Midlands who have provided advice and significant financial support of Beacon since its inception; All our funders who have enabled each stage of the project to happen; The Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design at the University of Lincoln for financially supporting this publication; The students and staff at Kesteven and Sleaford High School, Sleaford; The students and staff at Carres Grammar School, Sleaford; All the volunteers who have generously given their time to help with various aspects of *Our Name is Legion*; Chris Bird for coordinating filming of the event. Most importantly Kelly Large whose enthusiasm and commitment were integral to the project's success.

Beacon Artproject Limited is a not for profit company limited by guarantee.  
Registration No. 5809581. Registered charity No. 1130703.  
Registered office: Reading Room & Chapel, High Street, Wellingore,  
Lincoln LN5 0HW

